Design decisions on the cultural content of a secondary English course for Morocco

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This paper discusses the choices made in a large scale textbook project concerning the cultural content of the new English course for Moroccan secondary schools. We look first at the different meanings of 'culture' in foreign language teaching; at the possible arguments for including a foreign cultural component in an English course designed for a national market in a non-anglophone country; and at the means of conveying this cultural component. The paper then suggests an idealized procedure for deciding on the cultural content of a course, and goes on to apply this procedure to the Moroccan case, outlining the solutions adopted. In conclusion, it is suggested that what should really determine these choices is not the top-down strategy that has been presented, but rather the prevailing attitude towards the foreign culture among teachers of English. For in our opinion, it is teachers' attitudes to a language textbook that most of all determine its effectiveness and its useful life-span.[1]

Four meanings of 'culture'

We have found it convenient to distinguish four separate sorts of 'culture' that language teaching may involve.

The aesthetic sense

Culture with a capital C: the media, the cinema, music (whether serious or popular) and, above all, literature—the study of which used often to be one of the main reasons for language teaching. Many of these forms of culture are at the same time sources of information on culture in our second sense.

The sociological sense

Culture with a small c: the organization and nature of family, of home life, of interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institutions. This, of course, is a vast area from which only salient points can ever be selected.

The semantic sense

The conceptual system embodied in the language and, according to the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis, conditioning all our perceptions and our thought processes. Many semantic areas (e.g., food, clothes, institutions) are culturally distinctive because they relate to a particular way of life— that is, to our sociological sense of culture. For instance you cannot learn to use the names of meals without learning the main meal times. So these cultural features—like culture in our sociological sense—may differ for English from one English-speaking country to another.

On the other hand, some more general conceptual areas may be the same in different societies using the same language: time and space relations, emotional states, colours, lexical hyponymy. But the amount of language involved may not be very great for, as Stern (1983: 253) points out, it is always the same old examples that are cited in evidence of the distinctiveness of the conceptual systems of different languages and cultures.

The pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) sense

The background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills that, in addition to mastery of the language code, make possible successful communication:

—the ability to use appropriate exponents of the various communicative functions;

—the ability to use appropriate intonation patterns;

—the ability to conform to norms of politeness, where different from the learners' culture, including taboo avoidance;

—awareness of conventions governing interpersonal relations—questions of status, obligation, licence, where different from the learners' culture;

—finally and above all, familiarity with the main rhetorical conventions in different written genres eg, different types of letters and messages, form-filling, advertisements.

Arguments for a cultural content

We then examined the reasons for including in a foreign language course cultural components of one or another of the above types.

Clearly our last two senses of culture—the *pragmatic* and, to a much smaller extent, the *semantic*—are in some degree necessary to the learners' achievement of a measure of communicative competence. But what of the possible reasons for including cultural elements of the first two types—*aesthetic* and *sociological*? Here are the main arguments that have been put forward:

—to foster international understanding and counter negative stereotypes and other prejudices (Seelye, 1974);

—to encourage the learners to compare their own and the foreign culture and arrive thus at a better understanding and appreciation of their own (documented in Byram, 1986: 323);

—to facilitate the learners' possible future visits to the foreign countries concerned or contacts with people from them;

—to integrate the language course in an interdisciplinary, thematic curriculum;

—to motivate the learners—a common point of view in Europe and North America (see for examples Courtillon, 1984: 51).

Interesting as these arguments are, we do not accept their relevance to the case of secondary English in Morocco at the present time. But before

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turning to specifics, we must briefly consider the ways in which textbooks convey cultural content and how, in a specific situation, the course designers can arrive at a suitable cultural mix.

How teaching material can convey a cultural content. In our view, cultural information, varying from hard fact to a mere whiff of the exotic, can be communicated by:

—informative or descriptive text material;

—texts presenting foreign attitudes and opinions;

—human-interest texts (including dialogues), authentic or fictitious, with details of everyday life;

—questionnaires, contextualized practice activities, writing tasks;

—lexis—particularly idioms—and unfamiliar collocations, which involve alien concepts;

—the exponents of a communicative function;

—realia, or pseudo-realia, of all sorts;

—illustrations in the student's book and other visuals;

—sound recordings.

In other words, almost everything in a language course is capable of carrying a cultural load of some sort. The relative weight of *foreign* culture in this load, the cultural mix, will depend on the selection of topics and notably on the proportion of textbook characters who are foreigners, on the cultural milieu where the action takes place (local, neutral, or foreign), on the extent of the differences between the background and foreign cultures, and on the role, if any, played by the foreign language in the background culture.

Strategies for warranting the use of the foreign language—English, say—by nationals of the learners' country include:

—an English-speaking schoolboy and/or schoolgirl on a visit to the country in question, possibly staying with a family who can speak English;

—young people from the country visiting an English-speaking country;

—young people inside the country meeting English-speaking visitors or residents.

These strategies can of course be combined in a single textbook, particularly if there is no requirement of unity of *dramatis personae* and setting.

Planning the cultural content of a national course An idealized top-down procedure for deciding on the foreign cultural content of a national English course might seek answers, in succession, to each of the following questions:

—What aims, if any, have the authorities set for the teaching of English in the school system?

—For the pupils for whom the course is designed, and in the light of the official aims of ELT, what are the likeliest future needs in English?

—What foreign cultural content will contribute to meeting these needs?

—Should the course give extensive exposure to this foreign cultural content, on the grounds that it is motivating; or minimal exposure, on the grounds that it is not? Should it be trimmed here and there on religious and/or moral grounds?

—How can the foreign cultural content best be sequenced over the duration of the course, so that the language textbooks are graded *culturally* as well as structurally, functionally, lexically, or stylistically, as Courtillon (1984) recommends?

—Finally, what sort of cultural mix in each coursebook can embody the cultural syllabus so planned?

We shall now try to apply this procedure to the case of secondary English in Morocco.

Aims of secondary English in Morocco

Almost all instruction in Moroccan schools is Arabic-medium up to Baccalaureate level. French, the second language, is studied as a subject from Primary 3 onwards, and English only for the final three years, Secondary 5 to 7. The new three-year English course, to be completed and revised by 1990, is for the use of all streams regardless of the relative importance of English in their curriculum. Almost all the 2,500 secondary teachers of English are Moroccans, of whom about 45 per cent are women. Only a minority have visited English-speaking countries.

The only official formulation of the aims of ELT in Morocco states that English is taught in secondary schools 'for purposes of communication'. Nothing is said about where, with whom, or by what means this communication is expected to take place. However, the aim of English for communication does appear to minimize—as an aim if not as a means—culture in the *aesthetic* sense and also, very largely, in the *sociological* sense.

Any more specific estimates of the future needs in 'English for communication' of Moroccan secondary school learners have had to be worked out by the textbook writers. We have done so on the basis of intuition; discussion with groups of teachers; and questionnaires to and structured interviews with teachers, inspectors, and teacher-trainers. The consensus arising from this process (for there *is* a consensus) has been passed back to the inspectors, who are themselves in contact with teachers throughout the country. It is to this consensus that we now turn.

Estimation of learners' future needs

A preliminary judgement is that, for the great majority of learners, the secondary English course will be all the formal learning of English they ever get. Of the minority who later go on to further study of English, most will do so for purposes of more or less specialist communication, of many different types. The secondary course, it is agreed, should aim to diffuse among educated Moroccans of the coming generation some minimum

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competence in English of the type they are most likely to need, rather than preparing any minority among them for continuing learning of English.

Three further points are generally agreed. Firstly, if our learners have occasion to use English at all in adult life, it is at least as likely to be with other foreign-language speakers of English as with native or second-language speakers. Secondly—given the foreign countries to which Moroccans most often travel, from which they receive most visitors, and with which they do most business—this communication is likeliest to take place in Morocco itself, to a lesser extent in various non-anglophone countries, and only for a small minority of Moroccans, in the USA, Britain, or another English-speaking country. Thirdly, any future need of our learners for English is more likely to be for written than for spoken English. Almost certainly more of them will need to read English than to listen to it, and more will need to write it than to speak it. Moreover, testing for the Baccalaureate is of reading and writing only.

Cultural content— estimated needs and wants This consensus on the likeliest future communicative needs argues against teaching any *sociological* cultural content for its own sake, the more so since the culture of everyday life in the English-speaking world is not a single cultural system, but several. But what of motivation and other attitudinal factors?

Motivation or alienation? Three questions We asked our informants three questions:

1 Can the use of a foreign milieu, by inviting cultural comparisons, contribute to students' discontent with their own material culture and to the yearning for the big city and the fleshpots of Europe?

Most English teachers feel that it can.

2 Are there patterns of behaviour in an English-speaking social context that most Moroccans would prefer not to see presented as models to their young people?

Again, the commonest answer is yes.

3 Will Moroccan secondary learners still be motivated to learn English if the language is not presented to them, as it has been up to now, in the context of an English-speaking country?

Here the consensus, confirmed in trialling and in subsequent feedback on books already in use in a first edition, is that today's secondary learners are not *less* but *more motivated to learn English when it is presented in contexts that relate its use realistically to their lives as young adults in Morocco.*

In response to this we have suggested, in discussion with informants, that 'de-Anglo-Americanized English' (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984: 16) may be just as alienating for small-town secondary learners as 'English-in-America/Britain' is thought to be. After all, this 'decultured' English—the English of hotel and airport, of foreign visitor or business correspondent—is equally remote from the personal experience of most of our

learners, and equally beyond the economic reach of the majority of them. The reply we have often received is that it is not novelty of setting *per se* that alienates people from their own culture, but rather the obvious contrasts between their culture and a foreign one with more material advantages, economic opportunities, and freedom of behaviour. There is no question here of the 'submergence' of Morocco's own cultural identity against which Alptekin and Alptekin (1984: 15) warn, either by French culture or—even less—by Anglo-American influences. But many Moroccan teachers of English are uncomfortable in the role of presenters of alien cultures with which they may not identify and which they perhaps have not themselves experienced.

Choice of setting   For all these reasons, over 90 per cent of the geographically specific content of the new secondary English course is situated in Morocco itself, and more than half the characters are Moroccan. Anglo-American cultural content is restricted to the *pragmatic* sense—and, very marginally, the *semantic* sense. Even here, of course, only those features are included that are appropriate to the length of the course (three years), and they are highlighted only as judged necessary for speakers of both Arabic and French.

Choice of variety   As for the variety of English adopted as standard, the course is something
of English   of a hybrid. Most Moroccan teachers of English have been exposed to both American English (AE) and British English (BE). The spelling adopted in our textbooks is BE. Lexis is BE except for those AE forms that are in standard use among Moroccan users of English. Grammar in first presentation is more often BE than AE, though as the course progresses, parallel AE and BE forms often both occur. Where pronunciation is indicated, both AE and BE are given in the teachers' books, with BE broad transcription used for both. For those aspects of the *pragmatic* sense of culture that are listed above, we have tried to include only features acceptable in both AE and BE. In view of the variety of pragmatic systems that Kachru (1977: 34) discerns in English, our solution can claim only to be an Anglo-American hybrid, and not perhaps a truly international decultured English.

Strategies   In addition to the informants' views already mentioned, two other preva-
adopted   lent attitudes have influenced the choice of situational context for these books. Firstly, it is felt that, as a foreign language, English should be used in textbook situations only in contexts in which it might plausibly be used in real life and not, for example, between Moroccans in the absence of a foreigner. Secondly, the negative stereotypes associated with tourists and with tourist guides make all casual encounters between Moroccans and foreign visitors a hazardous area for textbook writers. Such situations have sometimes proved very useful (for example in role-plays), but are acceptable to all only if treated as amusing portrayals of stereotypes.

The main situational strategies adopted in the course are:

1 dealings in Morocco between Moroccans and resident English-speaking foreigners, native and non-native speakers;

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2 fictitious reports, interviews, studio games, and phone-in programmes on the real-life English-language service of the Moroccan radio;

3 reports, articles, advertisements, readers' letters, and interviews from an imaginary English-language newspaper in Morocco, including real interviews with Moroccan celebrities, translated if necessary and edited;

4 exchanges by letter, postcard, telegram, and telephone between Moroccans in Morocco and native and non-native English-speakers in their own countries—America, Britain, Germany, India, and Sweden.

Text types   The proportion of fictitious human-interest text decreases as the course progresses and there is more scope for informative and discursive text— sometimes Morocco-specific, sometimes of general relevance: for example, agriculture, sport, technology, unemployment, history, population, the history of science, music. Fictitious members of the cast of characters continue, however, to reappear throughout the course to provide contexts for language practice and for correspondence, for both reading and writing purposes. Scenes of home life are limited to an Anglo-American ménage living in Morocco and their Moroccan friends and neighbours, and to occasional visits by foreigners to Moroccan households.

We hope that these situational devices have succeeded in providing what Alptekin and Alptekin (1984: 18) call 'contexts which are culturally and cross-culturally relevant to students' lives'. The Moroccan characters in the course are not, of course, fully representative: all are educated town-dwellers, mostly students or young professionals—and English-speaking. Their flaws of character are not on the whole as serious as those of some of the foreign characters and, up to now, exam failure and unemployment have befallen only non-Moroccans. But, all in all, we feel that this *mise en scène* presents a world to which Moroccan secondary learners can reasonably aspire and with which they can identify without alienation.

Conclusion
The primacy of
teachers' attitudes

In this paper we have presented a top-down account of design choices regarding the cultural content of a national secondary English course. The appropriate type of cultural content is deduced from officially stated aims and from estimations of learners' likeliest future needs. Teachers are consulted on the motivational value—positive or negative—of foreign cultural content, with a view to augmenting this content beyond the learners' estimated needs if this is likely to be useful and innocuous. In the case of the new Moroccan textbook project, it was decided to keep foreign cultural content to a minimum.

But this account, we feel, does not bring out the crucial nature of teachers' attitudes towards course content. We want to end by stressing the necessity, as regards cultural content, of keeping to what the teachers who will use the course are, on the whole, prepared to identify with. It is changing teacher attitudes, no doubt reflecting wider currents in their society as well as prevailing fashion in the language-teaching profession,

that mainly determine the phenomenon of the life-cycle of a language course. Stevick (1976: 104) presents the paradox of two different language classes, both successfully learning the same foreign language, though taught by different teachers using different methods based on mutually contradictory theoretical premisses. The key to the paradox is each teacher's belief in his or her method. Similarly, a course that worked well five years ago may now no longer do so, though learners, conditions, and exams are still the same. The teachers' commitment to the material is again the obvious explanation. Students use a particular course only once, but teachers will use it many times. And it is cultural content, more than any other single aspect, that in our opinion influences teachers' attitudes and so can make or break a language course for a national market.

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Note
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